



Emery Walker P.A. sc.

William Barnes
1801-1886

**SELECT POEMS OF
WILLIAM BARNES**

**CHOSEN AND EDITED
WITH A PREFACE AND GLOSSARIAL NOTES**

**BY
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PREFACE

THIS volume of verse includes, to the best of my judgement, the greater part of that which is of the highest value in the poetry of William Barnes. I have been moved to undertake the selection by a thought that has overridden some immediate objections to such an attempt,—that I chance to be (I believe) one of the few living persons having a practical acquaintance with letters who knew familiarly the Dorset dialect when it was spoken as Barnes writes it, or, perhaps, who know it as it is spoken now. Since his death, education in the west of England as elsewhere has gone on with its silent and inevitable effacements, reducing the speech of this country to uniformity, and obliterating every year many a fine old local word. The process is always the same: the word is ridiculed by the newly taught; it gets into disgrace; it is heard in holes and corners only; it dies; and, worst of all, it leaves no synonym. In the villages that one recognizes to be the scenes of these pastorals the poet's nouns, adjectives, and idioms daily cease to be understood by

the younger generation, the luxury of four demonstrative pronouns, of which he was so proud, vanishes by their compression into the two of common English, and the suffix to verbs which marks continuity of action is almost everywhere shorn away.

To cull from a dead writer's whole achievement in verse portions that shall exhibit him is a task of no small difficulty, and of some temerity. There is involved, first of all, the question of right. A selector may say: These are the pieces that please me best; but he may not be entitled to hold that they are the best in themselves and for everybody. This opens the problem of equating the personality—of adjusting the idiosyncrasy of the chooser to mean pitch. If it can be done in some degree—one may doubt it—there are to be borne in mind the continually changing taste of the times. But, assuming average critical capacity in the compiler, that he represents his own time, and that he finds it no great toil to come to a conclusion on which in his view are the highest levels and the lowest of a poet's execution, the complete field of the work examined almost always contains a large intermediate tract where the accomplishment is of nearly uniform merit throughout, selection from which must be by a process of sampling rather than of gleaning; many a poem, too, of indifferent achievement in its wholeness may contain

some line, couplet, or stanza of great excellence; and contrariwise, a bad or irrelevant verse may mar the good remainder; in each case the choice is puzzled, and the balance struck by a single mind can hardly escape being questioned here and there.

A word may be said on the arrangement of the poems as 'lyrical and elegiac'; 'descriptive and meditative'; 'humorous'; a classification which has been adopted with this author in the present volume for the first time. It is an old story that such divisions may be open to grave objection, in respect, at least, of the verse of the majority of poets, who write in the accepted language. For one thing, many fine poems that have lyric moments are not entirely lyrical; many largely narrative poems are not entirely narrative; many personal reflections or meditations in verse hover across the frontiers of lyricism. To this general opinion I would add that the same lines may be lyrical to one temperament and meditative to another; nay, lyrical and not lyrical to the same reader at different times, according to his mood and circumstance. Gray's *Elegy* may be instanced as a poem that has almost made itself notorious by claiming to be a lyric in particular humours, situations, and weathers, and waiving the claim in others.

One might, to be sure, as a smart impromptu, narrow down the definition of lyric to the safe boun-

dary of poetry that has all its nouns in the vocative case, and so settle the question by the simple touchstone of the grammar-book, adducing the *Benedicite* as a shining example. But this qualification would be disconcerting in its stringency, and cause a fluttering of the leaves of many an accepted anthology.

A story which was told the writer by Mr. Barnes himself may be apposite here. When a pupil of his was announced in the *Times* as having come out at the top in the Indian Service examination-list of those days, the schoolmaster was overwhelmed with letters from anxious parents requesting him at any price to make their sons come out at the top also. He replied that he willingly would, but that it took two to do it. It depends, in truth, upon the other person, the reader, whether certain numbers shall be raised to lyric pitch or not; and if he does not bring to the page of these potentially lyric productions a lyrical quality of mind, they must be classed, for him, as non-lyrical.

However, to pass the niceties of this question by. In the exceptional instance of a poet like Barnes who writes in a dialect only, a new condition arises to influence considerations of assortment. Lovers of poetry who are but imperfectly acquainted with his vocabulary and idiom may yet be desirous of learning something of his message; and the most elementary guidance is of help to such students, for they are

liable to mistake their author on the very threshold. For some reason or none, many persons suppose that when anything is penned in the tongue of the country-side, the primary intent is burlesque or ridicule, and this especially if the speech be one in which the sibilant has the rough sound, and is expressed by Z. Indeed, scores of thriving storytellers and dramatists seem to believe that by transmuting the flattest conversation into a dialect that never existed, and making the talkers say 'be' where they would really say 'is', a Falstaffian richness is at once imparted to its qualities.

But to a person to whom a dialect is native its sounds are as consonant with moods of sorrow as with moods of mirth: there is no grotesqueness in it as such. Nor was there to Barnes. To provide an alien reader with a rough clue to the taste of the kernel that may be expected under the shell of the spelling has seemed to be worth while, and to justify a division into heads that may in some cases appear arbitrary.

In respect of the other helps—the glosses and phrases given on each page—it may be assumed that they are but a sorry substitute for the full significance the original words bear to those who read them without translation, and know their delicate ability to express the doings, joys and jests, troubles, sorrows, needs and sicknesses of life in the rural world as

elsewhere. The Dorset dialect being—or having been—a tongue, and not a corruption, it is the old question over again, that of the translation of poetry; which, to the full, is admittedly impossible. And further; gesture and facial expression figure so largely in the speech of husbandmen as to be speech itself; hence in the mind's eye of those who know it in its original setting each word of theirs is accompanied by the qualifying face-play which no construing can express.

It may appear strange to some, as it did to friends in his lifetime, that a man of insight who had the spirit of poesy in him should have persisted year after year in writing in a fast-perishing language, and on themes which in some not remote time would be familiar to nobody, leaving him pathetically like

A ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was
burned;

—a language with the added disadvantage by comparison with other dead tongues that no master or books would be readily available for the acquisition of its finer meanings. He himself simply said that he could not help it, no doubt feeling his idylls to be an extemporization, or impulse, without prevision or power of appraisalment on his own part.

Yet it seems to the present writer that Barnes,

despite this, really belonged to the literary school of such poets as Tennyson, Gray, and Collins, rather than to that of the old unpremeditating singers in dialect. Primarily spontaneous, he was academic closely after; and we find him warbling his native wood-notes with a watchful eye on the predetermined score, a far remove from the popular impression of him as the naif and rude bard who sings only because he must, and who submits the uncouth lines of his page to us without knowing how they come there. Goethe never knew better of his; nor Milton; nor, in their rhymes, Poe; nor, in their whimsical alliterations here and there, Langland and the versifiers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In his aim at closeness of phrase to his vision he strained at times the capacities of dialect, and went wilfully outside the dramatization of peasant talk. Such a lover of the art of expression was this penman of a dialect that had no literature, that on some occasions he would allow art to overpower spontaneity and to cripple inspiration; though, be it remembered, he never tampered with the dialect itself. His ingenious internal rhymes, his subtle juxtaposition of kindred lippings and vowel-sounds, show a fastidiousness in word-selection that is surprising in verse which professes to represent the habitual modes of language among the western peasantry.

We do not find in the dialect balladists of the seventeenth century, or in Burns (with whom he has sometimes been measured), such careful finish, such verbal dexterities, such searchings for the most cunning syllables, such satisfaction with the best phrase. Had he not begun with dialect, and seen himself recognized as an adept in it before he had quite found himself as a poet, who knows that he might not have brought upon his muse the disaster that has befallen so many earnest versifiers of recent time, have become a slave to the passion for form, and have wasted all his substance in whittling at its shape.

From such, however, he was saved by the conditions of his scene, characters, and vocabulary. It may have been, indeed, that he saw this tendency in himself, and retained the dialect as a corrective to the tendency. Whether or no, by a felicitous instinct he does at times break into sudden irregularities in the midst of his subtle rhythms and measures, as if feeling rebelled against further drill. Then his self-consciousness ends, and his naturalness is saved.

But criticism is so easy, and art so hard : criticism so flimsy, and the life-seer's voice so lasting. When we consider what such appreciativeness as Arnold's could allow his prejudice to say about the highest-soaring among all our lyricists ; what strange criticism Shelley himself could indulge in now and then ; that

the history of criticism is mainly the history of error, which has not even, as many errors have, quaintness enough to make it interesting, we may well doubt the utility of such writing on the sand. What is the use of saying, as has been said of Barnes, that compound epithets like 'the blue-hill'd worold', 'the wide-horn'd cow,' 'the grey-topp'd heights of Paladore,' are a high-handed enlargement of the ordinary ideas of the field-folk into whose mouths they are put? These things are justified by the art of every age when they can claim to be, as here, singularly precise and beautiful definitions of what is signified; which in these instances, too, apply with double force to the deeply tinged horizon, to the breed of kine, to the aspect of Shaftesbury Hill, characteristic of the Vale within which most of his revelations are enshrined.

Dialect, it may be added, offered another advantage to him as the writer, whatever difficulties it may have for strangers who try to follow it. Even if he often used the dramatic form of peasant speakers as a pretext for the expression of his own mind and experiences—which cannot be doubted—yet he did not always do this, and the assumed character of husbandman or hamleteer enabled him to elude in his verse those dreams and speculations that cannot leave alone the mystery of things,—possibly an unworthy mystery and disappointing if

solved, though one that has a harrowing fascination for many poets,—and helped him to fall back on dramatic truth, by making his personages express the notions of life prevalent in their sphere.

As by the screen of dialect, so by the intense localization aforesaid, much is lost to the outsider who by looking into Barnes's pages only revives general recollections of country life. Yet many passages may shine into that reader's mind through the veil which partly hides them; and it is hoped and believed that, even in a superficial reading, something more of this poet's charm will be gathered from the present selection by persons to whom the Wessex R and Z are uncouth misfortunes, and the dying words those of an unlamented language that need leave behind it no grammar of its secrets and no key to its tomb.

T. H.

September, 1908.

The poems entitled 'The Lost Little Sister', 'Winter a-comèn', 'The Wind at the Door', 'White an' Blue', and 'The Fall' are printed by permission of the Rev. W. Miles Barnes, son of the poet. The four poems 'Melhill Feast', 'The Bars on the Landridge', 'Joy Passing By', and 'The Morning Moon'—which are among the few written by Barnes in other than dialect—are taken by the kind permission of Messrs. Macmillan from *Poems of Rural Life in Common English* published by them in 1868. These permissions are gratefully acknowledged by editor and publisher.

The dark'nèn day mid læve behind
 Woone tongue that I shall always vind,
 A-whisperèn kind, when birds be still.

Zoo let the day come on to spread
 His kindly light above my head, 10
 Wi' zights to zee, an' sounds to hear,
 That still do cheer my thoughtvul mind ;
 Or let en goo, an' læve behind
 An' hour to stroll along the gleädes,
 Where night do drown the beeches' sheädes,
 On grasses' bleädes, when birds be still.

Vor when the night do lull the sound
 O' cows a-bleärèn out in ground,
 The sh'ill-vaïc'd dog do stan' an' bark
 'Ithin the dark, beside the road ; 20
 An' when noo cracklèn waggon's lwoad
 Is in the læne, the wind do bring
 The merry peals that bells do ring,
 O ding-dong-ding, when birds be still.

ZUN-ZET

WHERE the western zun, unclouded,
 Up above the grey hill-tops,
 Did sheen drough ashes, lofty sh'ouDED,
 On the turf beside the copse,

6 mid] may. 18 in ground] in the field.
 3 sh'ouDED] boughed.

In zummer weather,
 We together,
 Sorrow-slightèn, work-vorgettèn,
 Gambol'd wi' the zun a-zettèn.

There, by flow'ry bows o' bramble,
 Under hedge, in ash-tree sheädes, 10
 The dun-heair'd ho'se did slowly ramble
 On the grasses' dewy bleädes,
 Zet free o' lwoads,
 An' stwony rwoads,
 Vorgetvul o' the lashes frettèn,
 Grazèn wi' the zun a-zettèn.

There wer rooks a-beätèn by us
 Drough the air, in a vlock,
 An' there the lively blackbird, nigh us,
 On the meäple bough did rock, 20
 Wi' ringèn droat,
 Where zunlight smote
 The yollow boughs o' zunny hedges
 Over western hills' blue edges.

Waters, drough the meäds a-purlèn,
 Glissen'd in the evenèn's light,
 An' smoke, above the town a-curlèn,
 Melted slowly out o' zight ;
 An' there, in glooms
 Ov unzunn'd rooms, 30
 To zome, wi' idle sorrows frettèn,
 Zuns did set avore their zettèn.

We were out in geämes and reäces,
 Loud a-laughèn, wild in me'th,
 Wi' windblown heäir, an' zunbrown'd feäces,
 Leäpèn on the high-sky'd e'th,
 Avore the lights
 Wer tin'd o' nights,
 An' while the gossamer's light nettèn
 Sparkled to the zun a-zettèn. 40

SPRING

Now the zunny air's a-blowèn
 Softly over flowers a-growèn ;
 An' the sparklèn light do quiver
 On the ivy-bough an' river ;
 Bleätèn lambs, wi' woolly feäces,
 Now do play, a-runnèn reäces ;
 An' the springèn
 Lark 's a-zingèn,
 Lik' a dot avore the cloud,
 High above the ash's sh'oud. 10

Zoo come along, noo longer heedvul
 Ov the viër, leätely needvul,
 Over grass o' slopèn leäzes,
 Zingèn zongs in zunny breäzes ;

- 34 me'th] mirth. 36 Leäpèn] leaping. e'th] earth.
 38 Wer tin'd] Were lit.
 10 sh'oud] boughs. 13 leäzes] pastures.

The sheädes o' leafy buds, avore
 The peänes, do sheäke upon the glass,
 An' stir in light upon the vloor,
 Where now vew veet do pass.
 An' stir in light upon the vloor,
 Where there's a-stirrèn nothèn mwore.

This wind mid dreve upon the maïn
 My brother's ship, a-plowèn foam, 20
 But not bring mother cwold nor rain,
 At her now happy hwome.
 But not bring mother cwold nor rain,
 Where she is out o' päin.

A SNOWY NIGHT

'TWER at night, an' a keen win' did blow
 Vrom the east under peäle-twinklèn stars,
 All a-zweepèn along the white snow;
 On the groun', on the trees, on the bars,
 Vrom the hedge where the win' russled droo,
 There a light-russlèn snow-doust did vall;
 An' noo pleäce wer a-vound that wer lew,
 But the shed, or the ivy-hung wall.

Then I knock'd at the wold passage door
 Wi' the win'-driven snow on my locks; 10
 Till, a-comèn along the cwold vloor,
 There my Jenny soon answer'd my knocks.

19 wind mid dreve] wind may drive.

4 bars] railings. 7 lew] sheltered.

An' loose-ear'd barley, hangèn down
 Outside the wheels a'most to groun',
 An' lwoads o' hay so sweet an' dry,
 A-builed straight, an' long, an' high ; 40
 An' hay-meäkers a-zittèn roun'
 The reäves, a-ridèn hwome vrom groun',
 When Jim gi'ed Jenny's lips a smack,
 An' jealous Dicky whipp'd his back ;
 An' maidens scream'd to veel the thumps
 A-gi'ed by trenches an' by humps.
 But he, an' all his hosses too,
 'V a-ben a-done vor years agoo.

THE VAİCES THAT BE GONE

WHEN evenèn sheädes o' trees do hide
 A body by the hedge's zide,
 An' twitt'rèn birds, wi' playsome flight,
 Do vlee to roost at comèn night,
 Then I do saunter out o' zight
 In orcha'd, where the pleäce woonce rung
 Wi' laughs a-raised an' zongs a-zung
 By vaices that be gone.

There's still the tree that bore our swing,
 An' others where the birds did zing ; 10
 But long-leav'd docks do overgrow
 The groun' we trampled beäre below

38 groun'] field.

45 veel] feel.

Wi' merry skippèns to an' fro
 Bezide the banks, where Jim did zit
 A-playèn o' the clarinit
 To vaices that be gone.

How mother, when we us'd to stun
 Her head wi' all our nàisy fun,
 Did wish us all a-gone vrom hwome:
 An' now that zome be dead, an' zome 20
 A-gone, an' all the pleâce is dum',
 How she do wish, wi' useless tears,
 To have ageän about her ears
 The vaices that be gone!

Vor all the maïdens an' the bwoys
 But I, be married off all woys,
 Or dead an' gone; but I do bide
 At hwome, alwone, at mother's zide,
 An' often, at the evenèn-tide,
 I still do saunter out, wi' tears, 30
 Down drough the orcha'd, where my ears
 Do miss the vaices gone.

18 nàisy] noisy.

The grey-poll'd bennet-stems did hem
 Each half-hid letter's zunken rim,
 By leädy's-vingers that did spread
 In yollow red, at Meldonley.
 An' heärebells there wi' light blue bell
 Shook soundless on the letter L, 30
 To ment the bells when L vor Lee
 Become a D, at Meldonley.

Vor Jessie, now my wife, do strive
 Wi' me in life, an' we do thrive ;
 Two sleek-heäir'd meäres do sprackly pull
 My waggon vull, at Meldonley ;
 An' small-hoof'd sheep, in vleecees white,
 Wi' quickly-pankèn zides, do bite
 My thymy grass, a-mark'd vor me
 In black, T. D., at Meldonley. 40

PRAÏSE O' DORSET

WE Dorset, though we mid be hwomely,
 Be'nt asheäm'd to own our pleäce ;
 An' we've zome women not uncomely,
 Nor asheäm'd to show their feäce ;
 We've a meäd or two wo'th mowèn,
 We've an ox or two wo'th showèn,
 In the village,
 At the tillage,

25 bennet-stems] grass-bents. 31 ment] signify. 35
 sprackly] actively. 38 pankèn] panting.
 5 wo'th] worth.

Come along an' you shall vind
 That Dorset men don't sheäme their kind. 10
 Friend an' wife,
 Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers,
 Happy, happy, be their life !
 Vor Dorset dear
 Then gi'e woone cheer ;
 D'ye hear? woone cheer !

If you in Dorset be a-roamèn,
 An' ha' business at a farm,
 Then woont ye zee your eäle a-foamèn,
 Or your cider down to warm! 20
 Woont ye have brown bread a-put ye,
 An' some vinny cheese a-cut ye!
 Butter?—rolls o't,
 Cream?—why bowls o't,
 Woont ye have, in short, your vill,
 A-gi'ed wi' a right good will!

If you do zee our good men travel,
 Down a-voot, or on their meäres,
 Along the windèn leänes o' gravel,
 To the markets or the feäirs,— 30
 Though their hosses' cwoats be ragged,
 Though the men be muddy-laggèd,
 Be they roughish,
 Be they gruffish,
 They be sound, an' they will stand
 By what is right wi' heart an' hand.

Friend an' wife,
Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers,
Happy, happy, be their life!
Vor Dorset dear
Then gi'e woone cheer;
D'ye hear? woone cheer!

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